



Chapter 15

A half hour later, while parents enjoyed free time, a ranger talked to the twins about the Big Cypress Preserve Cypress. When he was finished they divided into teams. Along with their new friends, Ben and Bekka were on Team Anhinga. Standing at the edge of the knee-deep water, some almost changed their minds. It was beyond anything they expected. The water was warm, but it was dark brown, and with each step Ben was sure he would lose his shoe in the mucky bottom.

Each group had been assigned a ranger to guide them, but the ranger for the Anhinga team left to get first-aid for a photographer who had been taking their group's picture and lost his balance. As he fell, he forgot about the danger of grabbing sawgrass and cut his hand quite badly.

"If our mother was here," Ben told the group, "she'd have enough band-aids for all those cuts."

The ranger told their group he would send another ranger to guide them. In the meantime, they were to look up, look down, look all around for secrets of the slough.

Standing in the water, smooth-bark cypress trees surrounded them. They had a shape Ben had never seen before. Branches were growing in all directions. He couldn't imagine wandering through there at night. The moon would make such creepy



shadows, he was sure he could walk on water if that was the only way to get out!

“Bekka, you doing okay?” Ben asked, feeling a bit uneasy. The water was above their knees and walking was difficult. At times he felt he should protect his sister, even though she said she didn’t need protecting.

“I’m okay,” she replied. “You okay?”

“Yeah.”

“What is it we’re supposed to be looking for?” Caden, the boy from Iowa, asked as he pushed his polarized sunglasses back up his nose. They kept falling down because of the greasy sun screen.

“We’re supposed to find a cypress tree with a knee,” his brother, Camden answered.

“Oh yeah, that’s right.” Caden was so focused on not falling down in the water he forgot what the ranger had told them to get a picture of. “But what’s a tree knee?”

Tomas and José laughed. They didn’t know either.

“FYI,” Bekka announced, “each of these trees have knees. See that part that is raised up? That’s a knee. And those roots? They are out of the water because they need to breathe air just like the bark does. And look, there’s an air plant growing on the side of the tree.”



“Tree knees, air plants. How do you know this stuff?” Makenna asked, quite impressed Bekka knew so much tree trivia.

“I have a book. I’ll show it to you when we get back to the campground.” She looked at Ben and smiled a big toothy grin.

Sometimes he wished he knew the stuff his sister knew, then he could impress people, but that would mean he’d have to have his nose in a book all the time. That wasn’t for him. But if they ever invented a slough-slogging video game with snakes crawling in and out of cypress trees, he’d buy it in a heartbeat and become Ben the Snake Slayer of the Slough!

“Ben, did you hear Caden?” Bekka asked her brother who was so deep in thought he didn’t hear Caden ask to borrow his binoculars.

“What?” Ben asked, looking at her.

“He wants to use your binoculars,” Bekka informed him.

“Oh, okay,” Ben said, pulling the strap from around his neck. “What are you looking at?”

“There’s a huge bird in that tree over there, and I want to get a better look,” Caden explained, putting the binoculars up to his eyes. He clunked them against his sunglasses. “Ow, that hurt.”

“That’s an anhinga, I think,” Bekka said.

“It’s got really weird-looking wings and a long skinny neck,” Caden commented. The ranger was right—Ben’s binoculars were a tool of discovery for nature lovers. It brought everything far away up close.



The black anhinga was fascinating to look at, but another movement in the binoculars caught Caden's eye.



“Sh-h, everyone, there’s a snake hanging in that tree,” Caden said, trying to keep his voice calm.

“Where?” Rennen asked, putting his hand up to Caden’s face. He wanted to look through the binoculars, but Caden wasn’t giving them up.

Caden pointed to a nearby tree and continued to stare. Everyone looked for the snake until they saw it draped over a limb. It slithered higher, its green tongue flicking in and out—probably in search of insects.



“He sees us!” Makenna squealed. “Look! He’s looking at us. I think he’s gonna come get us. Let’s get out of here.”

Her voice was getting higher and squeakier with every word. She grabbed so tightly to Bekka’s arm that it hurt. No one could move or take their eyes off the snake. They didn’t want it to get into the water without them knowing it.

Bekka opened her mouth to let out one of her famous screams. Ben couldn’t let that happen. The whole swamp would be terrified. He had to take charge.